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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE. NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/PASCUAL

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SUBJECT: ARIEL MAYOR: LET ME BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: Ariel settlement mayor Ron Nachman told PolOff on February 6 that Ariel would welcome settlers from outlying settlements and outposts into his "existing population center" if he were allowed to build homes for them. Nachman said he has approved town plans to increase Ariel's population from 18,000 to 60,000. Nachman and his staff said Ariel recently secured a donation of 2M USD from San Antonio evangelical minister John Hagee. PolOff observed active construction of two large apartment buildings and a dormitory at Ariel's college of 10,000 students, all previously approved. Photos of the construction are viewable at <http://www.state.sgov.go/p/nea/jerusalem>. END SUMMARY

Ariel: Population60,000?

2. (C) Polff visited the West Bank settlement of Ariel on February 6 to meet long time mayor, former MK, and settlement movement pioneer Ron Nachman and his Canadian-Israeli chief of staff, Dina Shalit. Nachan, who presides over Ariel's 18,000 residents, said he is frustrated by the GOI's refusal to permit him to build a modern shopping mall in Ariel, commenting that "The United States of America doesn't care about one shopping center in Ariel". He said Ariel's population is both aging and shrinking, but that he has "approved town plans" for building housing for up to 60,000 residents at Ariel, mostly in the southern half of the 22 km long Ariel finger.

Consolidating Settlements into "Existing Population Centers"

3. (C) Nachman characterized Ariel as an "existing population center in the words of President Bush" and said if he is allowed to build additional housing, settlers from nearby outposts and settlements might be willing to move into Ariel, particularly if they saw housing starts designated for them. (NOTE: Nachman was successful in the early 1990s in absorbing thousands of new immigrants from the former USSR; 9,000 Russian residents live in Ariel today. END NOTE) Ariel is home to some 40 families living in caravans who were evacuated from Gaza's Netzarim settlement in 2005. Nachman added that such a consolidation would also require the "transfer" of Arabs from village surrounding Ariel into Nablus and other Palestinian population centers. Nachman told PolOff he plans to run for a sixth term as mayor in municipal elections in November.

Despite Freeze, Two New Apartment Blocs and a Dormitory

4. (C) Although new construction approvals are not forthcoming from MOD, PolOff saw two new apartment complexes under construction in Ariel's eastern tip, both of which Shalit said were approved long ago. At Ariel's college of 10,000 students, PolOff saw bulldozers and bobcats clearing land and debris for a new dormitory overlooking the Palestinian village of Mardah to Ariel's north. PolOff toured land at Ariel's western entrance slated for the construction of the new shopping center. Shalit showed PolOff a newly installed "doublewide caravan" on a plot of 100 dunams (about 25 acres) set aside for a leadership/teambuilding institute with a ropes course. Shalit said the caravan was put in place "just before the settlement freeze went into effect" around the time of President Bush's January visit.

Evangelical support from Texas

5. (C) Nachman proudly displayed a large sweepstakes style check for 500,000 USD from evangelical megachurch minister John Hagee in San Antonio, Texas. COS Shalit added that Hagee's total contribution to Ariel last year was 2M USD and noted an upcoming gala honoring Hagee in which Ariel's sports and recreation facility would be renamed the "John Hagee Ministries Building".

